

## [Mary Anne Meehan]

Mass 1938-9

MARY ANNE MEEHAN

IRISH COOK

PAPER 4

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER LOUISE G. BASSETT

ADDRESS BROOKFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

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SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT MARY ANNE MEEHAN

ADDRESS BROOKFIELD MASSACHUSETTS

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Name: Louise G. Bassett

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Brookfield, Mass.

Topic: Mary Ann Meehan.

PAPER 4

St. Paul said "Let your speech be full of grace and seasoned with salt." Just how "full of grace" is the speech of Mary Ann Meehan is a mooted question, but it, indubitably, is "seasoned with salt" and therefore, full of flavor. Sometimes those "salt" words of hers catch you "on the raw" and make you smart, as no one knows better than one Mary Ann Meehan! Irish wit she has a-plenty. It gleams in her eyes and colors the tones of her voice. She is a stimulating personality. And her vigor of body seems but little impaired, despite the fact that she has worked hard all her life and has covered more than her allotted "three score and ten."

Yet even Mary Ann succumbed to a particularly vicious epidemic of "grippe" that swept through our town. It was when she was well on the road to recovery that I called on her to try to cheer her up; a Herculean task, since her illness had left her with a hair-trigger temper, plus a deep resentment that fate had dealt her such a blow.

"I'm never sick" she said to me. "But this thing has fair got me down. A product of the evil one it is! I've had more pains than Job..and none of his patience to bear them with!"

I had to laugh.

" 'Grippe' is pretty well named, I admit. It surely does grip you."

"And squeezes the marrow right out of your bones" answered Mary Ann." Oh, well I've bested the beast, so forget it I will.

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Come, now, you'd best have a cup of coffee. You're chilled through. And that's a fine invitation to this demon to pay you a visit. Coffee'll warm you up."

"I can't resist you, Mary Ann. You make the best coffee I ever tasted. What's your secret?"

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“Put enough coffee In! You can't make coffee without coffee, the way some tightwads do. But it has the finest flavor made the old fashioned way..with an egg. A heaping tablespoon to each cup and one for the pot (lest it feel alighted). Then bread a raw egg into the grounds and stir ‘em all up together. Put this in the bottom of the pot and pour on boiling water. Add the egg shell. Then boil five minutes! Well, all I can say is, it's got percolator and dripolater and all them other modern dinguses that they make coffee with today.....stung!

“I believe you, Mary Ann. Going to make mine that way?”

She grinned at me, but her eyes suddenly filled.

“I am not” she said, with a brave toss of her old head.” Is it Mrs. Rockerfeller you're thinking I am? Who's got eggs to waste in coffee nowadays?” I could have bitten my tongue out. I laughed to cover my shame.

“Not me, certainly” I said. “But thanks for the recipe. Someday when my ship comes in I'll try it. I'll wager that's a grand pot of it you've got going now. You certainly are a wonderful cook. But how did you happen to choose it for your life work?”

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“I didn't happen! It chose me. I always was cooking. I can't remember when I didn't know how. My mother was a corking cook. She could boil a ten-penny nail and make it taste good. I took after her. I could make cakes, light as a feather and I was a master hand at pie crusts. My tart shells would melt in your mouth; if I do say it myself. Everybody made jelly then and tarts was a favorite dessert. You never see a tart nowadays.”

“Right, alas!” I murmured.

“You know” she said “I hired out as a cook when I was only fourteen.”

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"Fourteen!" I gasped "Good heavens Mary Ann!"

"Well" she went on, belligerently, "I could cook and I was a big, strong lass. My mother was a widder and had four kids. Someone had to take hold and help her. Gussie was delicate and Jane wasn't stuck on work. Beats all how smart she was getting out of it! She married well, too. Nobody ever wanted me. Too homely. My mother near had a fit when I got to be twenty one and not even a beau! In these days it was a disgrace to be an old maid! My mother was always pretending I had chances, but she never fooled nobody. Everybody knew everybody's business then but it makes me laugh to see how things have changed. Girls like their independence, today. And they turn down darn nice lads to keep it. Most girls of my day would pick up with anybody rather than be an old maid. Silly!"

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"I, agree with you" I said. "But Mary Ann, I'm awfully inrerested in this first position you took so young."

She laughed, but her laugh had a sour note.

"Position!" she jeered "That's good! It was a 'job'..and a hard one and I was the hired girl..'help' but there was this to be said. The hired girl was generally treated like one of the family. I always et at the table with the family and set with them in the evening 'round the dining room table. They used to have hanging lamps then and they was awful nice. They burned kerosene. And you could pull 'em most up to the ceiling and most down to the table on brass chains. The family would set around that table and the women would sew carpet rags, op make patches for quilts or knit. It was awful pleasant. Oh..wait a bit..the coffee's perked'" She poured me a cup, fragrant and steaming.

"My, but that's a good, Mary Ann!"

"Let's see..where was I? Oh, yes..working out! Believe me, housework was a chore then..no gadgets like vacuum cleaners and electric washers and such. It was the broom

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and the scrubbing board and your two fists! Everybody worked in a groove, too. Wash on Mondays iron on Tuesday, mend on Wednesdays, Thursday and Friday house clean, and cook on Saturday. What a day that was! Pies and cookies and gingerbread and cakes and doughnuts and then everybody made their own bread. Goodness me, I had to set bread twice a week in that family and always had to make raised biscuit then, 5 too. How I hated Sunday! Believe me, it was no 'day of rest' for me. I had to get up the biggest dinner of the week..and use the best china on the table. I was always scared to death I'd nick it. It had belonged to the boss' mother and he was an awful fusser anyway..everything had to be just so. I was beat out when night come. This ain't no way to be talkin' I 'spose."

"Of course it is. You were so young to work so hard."

"Don't you fool yourself. That's the time to be working, I say. You can take it. You're strong."

"But, Mary Ann; you wouldn't be allowed to work like that today."

"I know it. But things was different then. Folks was awful too. Why this man's wife died after I'd been there eight or nine months and after that I had to come home to stay nights. There was four girls in the family, but would my mother let me stay there nights? Not by a jugful she wouldn't! Right after my supper dishes was done I had to make tracks for home. My reputation would have been ruined if I'd slept one night in that house. Nobody trusted anybody's morals then. Parents was awful strict. Girls, 'specially had to walk the chalk line, I'm telling you that I always did!"

"Why, Mary Ann" I laughed. "I'm surprised at you."

"No, you ain't. I bet you're thinkin' 'just like her'"

"Mary Ann!"

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"Okay, then..you want ....Well, I was thinking of the way the drummers used to come to Brookfield then..scads of 'em."

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" 'drummers'?" I queried.

"Yep. That's what they used to call travelling men then. Drummed up trade. See?"

I saw.

"Brookfield was a lively place at that time with mills and all and, as I said lots of drummers came to town and they liked to stay here over night 'cause we had a fine hotel..the Metropole...sometimes they'd stay two or three days and hire a man from the livery stable to drive 'em to near-by towns. Well, every summer night they'd be settin' out on the hotel piazza and the town girls of course was bewitched over them and they'd walk by and flirt some..and even the boldest of 'em would go buggy riding. "The girls was dying to go to the depot to see the trains come in the way the men and boys did, but no nice girl was allowed. However, you can bet that no good looking, drummer ever came to town that all the girls didn't know about it. My sister Jane was full of the old Nick and she and I took some awful chances sometimes but we hardly ever got caught... natural born crooks, I guess. But we did get found out one time. There was an awful nice lookin' lad out on the steps one summer night and Jane and I kept goin' by and Jane kept looking up at him and he finally comes down the steps and speaks to her. I was so scared I could only giggle, but Jane! (say she wouldn't been scared of the devil, himself) she wise-cracked and got him to laughing and pretty soon he asked us in to the hotel to supper. Jane accepts right off 7 the bat and drags me along too. I'd never been in a hotel dining room in my life and I was so excited I couldn't eat..but not Jane! She had the time of her life and he did, too. Then he said 'Let's go for a ride'. I got courage to say 'I don't want to' but Jane made me come along. We got back about half past eight, but that was like midnight to my mother. She was waiting for us..and what a tongue-lashing! It was no time before the whole town knew it.

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Some [patents?] forbid their girls to speak to us. We was considered 'fast' and what with ma on the rampage at home about it, life was plenty tough for Jane and I."

"Too bad" I said "to have to suffer for just a girlish prank! Good heavens there were two of you out with the man."

"That's just what one of the swell women in town said to my mother" cried Mary Ann. "She put herself out to come to my mother and she told her not to worry about what folks said and she was as nice as pie to us. She sure did chirk my mother up. And did she repeat it to the old gossips who criticized us! It shut them up."

"It does make a difference" I said "if those in assured social positions set their seal of approval upon you."

"I'll say it does. To be honest my Ma actually begun to put on airs about what we'd done and if anyone seemed shocked she'd quote Mrs. 'Aristocrat'. But she held the reins tighter than ever."

"Which do you think is the better way to bring up children, Mary Ann? By rule of thumb, the way you were, or they way parents 8 do today. Which do you believe is the better training?"

Mary Ann laughed loud and long.

"Trained? You don't think kids are trained today, do you? The kids I run up against don't pretend to mind. They're fresh as paint. And impudent. Pampered to death. If you go to see anyone who has kids you can't hear yourself think. They do all the talking. And their mothers are always showing them off. We had to keep our mouths shut when there was company 'round. When we done wrong we was whipped. We minded when we was spoke to. That much I think was better then the way they do now. But, on the other hand, a lot of notions that parents had was crazy and they was so high-handed that they drove kids

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doing things on the sly. Card playing was considered wicked. We were told it was a sin to play. Why, if my mother come across a pack of [cards?] she'd tear 'em in little bits and how she'd scold and punish us, too. But we always was circumventing her and sneaking 'em in. Then a girl, [who?] painted her face was considered 'fast'. My mother caught me putting flour on my face once for powder and how she carried on! Yep, young folks today have a better break than we did. And I think they're honester because they don't have to sneak to do what they want. And they're lots smarter. Movies and radio are wonderful. I love the movies. I wish I could go every day. Just think all they teach young folks.. more than they could learn in years when I was young."

I had had my second cup of coffee.

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"I suppose coffee made with an egg could be better, but I don't see how. Let me do these cups."

"You won't touch 'em. Leave 'em be. I can wash dishes when I don't have anybody to talk to."

She settled back in her rocking chair with a happy sigh and smiled at me.

"I'm awful glad you come in" she said "Why don't you take your hat off and not look as if you were going to 'beat it' the next minute?"

"I will" I said and suited the action to the word.

"Well, well, it's a new 'permanent' you've got, ain't it?"

"Like it?"

"Grand! They certainly are an improvement over the old curling iron that women had to stick down a lamp chimney to heat..they was always getting all smoked up and had to be



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wiped off with a piece of paper and hair didn't stay curled while you was getting out of the room, in hot weather.”

“I, too, remember those curling irons!” I said, feelingly.” And I will remember how easily they burned your hair!”

“I'll say they did!” said Mary Ann. “Well, a ‘permanent’ is tough going, I've heard; not that I ever had one!”

“But they last” I countered.

“You've got me there” she grinned. “Life, on the whole, is 10 easier all around. And pleasanter..and people are smarter. Why wouldn't they be? The radio keeps you informed about things it took weeks to learn about when I was a girl. Autos get you there faster'n horses, and airplanes faster than autos. I'm glad I lived to see these things. And women's clothes are so much simpler. Why I can remember my mother wearing those crazy hoop skirts. I've seen ‘em go whoopee, too, when she want careful settin' down..she'd show her panties then..and did the darlin' blush! And well I remember those skirts that I wore, trailin' the side walk and gathering dust..and the hobble skirts! Of all the foolish styles! How we did go waddling along! We had to pull ‘em up to our knees to get into a buggy or on the trolley car. And those Merry Widow hats! Brims like an umbrella and willow plumes a weepin' on 'em..and a million hat pins to keep 'em on!”

“I always liked willow plumes” I said.

“Pretty enough” she snorted, “but an awful care. I guess the biggest change of all is in bathing suits. The girls today wear a handkerchief and a pair of short pants, but I remember my first suit was of wool, dark blue, all trimmed with braid and with big bloomers underneath and long stockings, with laced up shoes..it's wonder that the weight of ‘em didn't drown me! “ “ Yes”, she continued “Folks, then, tried too hard to be modest. They tried too hard to keep young girls innocent. A twelve year old knows more today then

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most girls in my time did when they was married. You know that drummer I was telling you about? He 11 come to see my mother the next time he come to town. He heard that he got us girls in dutch. He told her he was just lonesome. My mother liked him but she wouldn't let Jane or me see him..he brought us some candy, but my mother wouldn't let us keep it. She made him take it away or thought she did.....she hadn't reckoned with Jane..leave it to her..she slipped out the back door and met him at the gate and took it. It was the best candy I ever ate. It was so wicked!" She winked at me. I laughed aloud. "Mary Ann, you're priceless!"

"I wish I was. I'd cash in on myself" she answered with ready wit.

"Well, you are a treasure, believe it or not."

"It's me that doesn't believe it" she said, soberly. "I've worked hard and I'm worth naught."

"You're worth much" I said. "And don't believe you'd have been content to be an idler."

"No, I wouldn't. After all work never kills you. It's figuring how to get out of it that wears folks out. Everybody had to work..or starve. We raised vegetables an canned 'em. My mother never bought anything but tea and coffee and flour. She canned fruit and vegetables all summer long and what she didn't can, she dried..she made gallons of pickles and preserves. She even had her own smoke house and cured her own ham and bacon over hickory and corn-cob fires. She had barrels of corned beef and salt pork. [Say?] the ant was a piker compared to my mother. She even made her own soap..and many's the batch I've made myself."

"Was it hard work!"

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"Lord, no. "All us kids fixed a hollow log on a sort of big flat stone did the stone was set up on a sort of table like, and then we put a kettle under to catch the lye. We put little pieces

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of wood in the log to make a drainlike and then put ashes and lime in till the kettle was full. After that I put the fat and lye in a big boiler and light the fire and cook till it was right...and you had to know when it was right or the whole thing was a mess. All the neighbors saved fat for me. I sold the soap, too. It was dandy.”

“What a worker!” was my response.

“Yep” was her [laconic?] answer. “I was just thinking of what a tough day ironing day used to be. We used irons with hot handles and heated them on a stove. You had to use holders and change the irons every little while. Tablecloths was terrible to do. They had to be dampened down almost soaking wet and ironed bone dry to keep their gloss. I used to sweat buckets over tablecloths. You never see 'em any more. Women have got smart. They use doilies.”

“Take it all in all, Mary Ann, I guess you're pretty well satisfied with the world of today.”

“I ain't wantin' to go back” she answered.